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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: POLLSTERS EXPLAIN MEDVEDEV AND "TEFLON VLAD'S"
APPROVAL RATING

REF: 08 MOSCOW 1608

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Representatives of Moscow polling firms told PolOff that Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev are almost certain to maintain high public opinion ratings--barring a calamity--due largely in part to Putin's almost mythical status, reinforcing the consensus that Putin remains the dominant figure in Russia. The tandem's ratings have recovered from a very slight dip, according to most firms, over the last year due to the economic crisis, but the polling firms themselves are still feeling the effects of the economic slump. Polling companies were quick to point out the advantages of using public opinion polling, but also cautioned against data that could be suspect due to the media or "made to order" polls. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) PolOff met with representatives from four of the most well-known polling firms in Moscow the week of September 28 to discuss the tandem and other issues involved in opinion polling in Russia. Representatives from the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), Levada Center, Bashkirova and Partners, and the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM) explained polling data in detail and discussed the political and economic context in which these firms work. See Reftel for a more thorough description of the firms' polling processes and techniques.

Tandem's Ratings Still High...

¶3. (C) The public approval ratings of Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev remained sky high at 81 and 75 percent, according to a recent poll from Levada. Polling representatives unanimously concluded that Putin's sustained, high-level numbers were a sign of his almost legendary status among Russians. Nikolay Popov of VTsIOM said that criticism never affects the "teflon" leader's numbers because Russians see Putin as the symbol of the new, resurgent, internationally-respected Russia. Medvedev's rating was still dependent upon Putin, and few Russians saw the President as an independent player. A September Levada poll showed that only 13 percent of Russians believed that power was solely in Medvedev's hands, while 32 percent believed it was in Putin's, and 48 percent believed power was generally shared between Putin and Medvedev. These numbers have not changed significantly over the last two years.

...And Impervious to Economic Malaise

¶4. (C) Boris Dubin of Levada and FOM Director Aleksandr

Oslon said that the economic crisis barely damaged the tandem's rating because most Russians blamed the crisis on the U.S., believed that oil and gas prices were out of the tandem's control, or condemned local officials for their problems (aka, belief in the Good Tsar). Analysts agreed that Putin, and to an increasing extent Medvedev, were known commodities to poll respondents, who trusted the tandem's ability to maintain stability and promote economic growth. Yelena Bashkirova and Levinson said that people did not trust any of the opposition leaders, although Bashkirova suggested that was due to the opposition's incompetence, while Levinson blamed the Kremlin's manipulation of the political arena.

What Could Change the Tandem's Ratings?

15. (C) Analysts said that Putin and Medvedev's ratings were more likely to remain steady or rise, but did offer a few alternatives that could lower the tandem's ratings. The most likely, according to Popov, Oslon, and Bashkirova was elite infighting that spilled into the public arena. All three, however, quickly noted that they do not see competition at this point between Putin and Medvedev. Oslon, who probably has the best access to the Kremlin, sees Medvedev working around the edges of Putin's political system, and thus unable or unwilling to significantly alter Russia's course. Popov added that Putin and Medvedev's approval ratings would drop only if significant, believable kompromat were released--a highly unlikely scenario--or if one or both were widely believed to have caused a nationwide catastrophe. All pollsters agreed that the tandem's rating would be

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significantly affected only by something that affected regular people's lives, such as inflation, corruption, taxes, prices for consumer goods, or availability of jobs.

16. (C) Another way in which Medvedev and Putin's ratings could change (albeit over the longterm) would be through an unlikely transformation of the media environment. Some pollsters explained that opinion polling in Russia was sometimes confusing because of the Kremlin's influence on the media. Boris Dubin of Levada said that the Kremlin used television (by far the most influential news media) to shape public opinion and blame the U.S. or another foreign entity for problems. He added that all Russian elite, but particularly Putin, jealously guarded their public images and approval ratings. Levinson and Oslon added (on opposite sides of the argument) that polling in Russia was difficult because firms were never sure whether public opinion reflected true beliefs (Oslon), or if it was a reflection of the manipulation of the media (Levinson).

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Economic Situation Impacting Firms' Bottom-Line

17. (C) The economic situation has to some extent affected all of the polling companies bottom-line, but political polling overall has declined surprisingly precipitously since the Kremlin maintained a keen eye on public opinion. Popov of VTsIOM and Oslon of FOM said that they regularly received orders from the Presidential Administration, most ministries, and state corporation leaders such as Anatoliy Chubais, but both admitted to a decrease in the number of government requests for polls, analysis, and raw data. Popov said that he knew each ministry received regular budget funds for public opinion polling, but few of these ministries were actually spending the money.

Comment

18. (C) Public opinion polls are tricky in many countries,

such as Russia, which is largely dependent upon individuals rather than institutions as the foundation for political stability. Popov cautioned that other leaders could emerge. He added that it was important to remember that in the late 90s, Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov had one of the highest public approval ratings and was a leading candidate to replace former President Yeltsin before Putin came onto the scene. The tandem appears to be working cooperatively, and all interlocutors said that they did not see, judging by the data, any competition between the two--although the public understands, representatives added, that Putin and Medvedev work in different spheres. Putin's endorsement, at least at this point, still appears to be the driving factor when it comes to opinion polling.

Beyrle